

Interview with Sarah Moulton Faux By Henry Fogel

I was completely taken by your recording of songs of Lola Williams—a composer whose name I had never encountered before. So my first (and probably obvious) questions are: How did you discover this music? And what was your initial reaction at that discovery?

I came to Lola Williams through her son, Derek Williams, one of my history teachers at Phillips Academy, Andover, a boarding school in Massachusetts where Lola had taught in the summer and which her three sons all attended. Unfortunately, I did not meet Lola when she was alive, but after she passed I offered to record a few of her songs for her family. When Derek sent me the initial batch (I believe *Plot of the Fairy King* and *Feste's Song* were in that group), they fitted my voice so well and I enjoyed working on them so much that I was curious to see if there were more. That was the start of several trips to Vermont, where Williams's music was now in boxes in Derek's basement, mixed in with hundreds if not thousands of pages of her prose and poetry writing. It ultimately became a wonderful detective project, as not only did we find more songs than we were expecting, but for every song there were multiple undated drafts, so determining which was the most "finished" or in some cases the most "beautiful" or "interesting" was a time-consuming but ultimately very fulfilling endeavor. There was even an instance where we were missing a few measures of *Where Should This Music Be?*, only to find a single page of music with the missing measures buried in another box. It was such a thrill to make those discoveries.

It seems to me that while Williams wrote in what would be called a fairly conservative idiom, she displayed a streak of harmonic adventure in her work. Did that strike you too? And how does that influence your performance of these songs?

Yes! Some songs feature modality, while others like *Celia Sings: Be Merry* and *There's Only One Man* are extremely pentatonic. An interesting feature of the piano writing is the extensive use of dominant 7ths, even in bass lines, which one might think would give the songs an ungrounded quality, but the strength of the vocal lines somehow counters this impression. So, the job of the singer becomes one of taking a position of strength in the texture, not simply riding over a lovely accompaniment.

The piano writing in these songs seems much more than mere accompaniment. Can you describe how you and your pianist (Ted Taylor) worked together in fashioning your performances?

It was a true collaboration. As you mentioned, some of the most interesting and emotionally compelling aspects of the songs are in the piano writing. I tried to be sensitive to that and give Ted the space to bring out Williams's musical ideas. Each piece took a lot of discussion and experimentation to reconcile the various elements into a cohesive whole.

Ted was an integral part of the process from the beginning. I would narrow down Williams's versions to what I felt were the strongest two or three, and then we would sit down at his piano, play through them, and sometimes do a page by page comparison. For example, deciding between the many versions of *Sonnet 116* was particularly challenging, and it ultimately came down to two measures of music in the piano part which we felt showed something a little different in Williams's piano writing than her other compositions.

On the disc you have other singers involved, because a number of the songs are for more than one voice. How did you go about choosing the other singers, and what was there reaction to discovering this music?

Nicholas Tamagna and I have performed together many times, including a recital of soprano/countertenor duets, *The Tyranny of Love*. Although Williams did not specifically write for countertenor, I was thrilled at the prospect that some of her pieces might lend themselves to that pairing.

Heather Johnson and Laura Krumm came to us on the recommendation of our producers, The American Opera Project and Laura Kaminsky. Although I had never worked with them before, as soon as Ted and I heard their voices, we knew they were the right singers for this project. All of the singers have a strong background and interest in performing new works, and it's pretty extraordinary to record with Judith Sherman, a five-time Grammy-winning producer.

I presume you have performed Williams's songs in recitals. What is the reaction of listeners upon encountering a composer of whom they have probably never heard?

The response has been overwhelmingly positive. Williams's music is very approachable and many of the songs are quite humorous. I think people find it refreshing.

When fashioning a recital that includes songs by Williams, what do you usually pair them with?

The songs are so versatile, they are a natural fit for many programs. For example, I did a program on Shakespeare's musical legacy, where Williams's songs were alongside Mendelssohn's incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Gounod's "Je veux vivre" from *Romeo and Juliet*. On one of my lecture recitals, *Romance, Trysts, and Intrigue: The Secret Love Lives of the Great Composers*, I placed Williams after a set by Gabriel Fauré that included *Lydia* and *L'hiver a cessé*. I believe in both instances that Williams's songs absolutely held their own.

Williams's scores are currently being prepared for publication by our transcriber Amy Scurria (who is also a composer), and I look forward to seeing how other singers choose to program her work.

In looking at the biography for you included in the booklet with the disc, I see the career of a singer with a very wide range of musical tastes and sympathies. Verdi, Puccini, Mozart, and Handel are to be expected from a lyric soprano, but also Gilbert and Sullivan seem to play a strong role. And there is also your willingness to expand into a composer whom virtually no one has discovered before you. Are there still more adventures on your part, more unknown or, perhaps, unexpected areas?

It would be thrilling to work on another project like this that combines archival work with performance and recording, especially if it involves women composers, as I strongly believe that they have been underserved by history. I'm also always open and eager to work with living composers.

One project I've been wanting to give more attention to is the life of one of my ancestors, Lillie Moulton, who was an American singer in Europe in the 1850s to the early 1900s. She studied with Manuel Garcia in London, and then worked with his sister Pauline Viardot when she moved to Paris. Lillie published two books of her letters back to America that are filled with fascinating accounts of her interactions with Rossini, Wagner, and Liszt. Massenet even dedicated songs to her. I've referenced her in previous recitals, but would love to explore her life and times more fully, perhaps as a one-woman show.

